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Risking the Strait Moroccan Labor Migration to Spain

Gregory White



A Spanish aid worker talks to some of the 97 sub-Saharan African immigrants who were intercepted by Spanish Civil Guard boats as they tried to arrive in rafts across the Strait of Gibraltar from Morocco November 21, 2000.

J. RAGEL-EFE/AP PHOTO

*Men who had never wanted anything very much saw the flare of want in the eyes of the migrants. And the men of the towns and of the soft suburban country gathered to defend themselves; and they reassured themselves that they were good and the invaders bad, as a man must do before he fights. These goddamned Okies are dirty and ignorant. They're degenerate, sexual maniacs. These goddamned Okies are thieves. They'll steal anything. They've got no sense of property rights.... They bring disease, they're filthy. We can't have them in the schools. They're strangers. How'd you like to have your sister go out with one of 'em? The local people whipped themselves into a mold of cruelty. Then they formed units, squads, and armed them—armed them with clubs, with gas, with guns. We own the country. We can't let these Okies get out of hand. And the men who were armed did not own the land, but they thought they did.—John Steinbeck, *The Grapes of Wrath**

On February 5, 2000, in a scene reminiscent of Steinbeck's *Grapes of Wrath*, anti-immigrant riots erupted in the southeastern Spanish town of El Ejido. For three days, crowds estimated at more than 5,000 people raged through El Ejido's Moroccan community, wielding metal bars and shouting "Out with the Moors!" Shops, houses, cars and factories were set afire, and police clashed with rioters. The

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Spanish daily *El País* reported that nearly a hundred people had received medical attention, although one could plausibly suspect that the number was much higher. The spark for the riot was the stabbing death of a Spanish woman and the arrest of a young Moroccan man the Spanish authorities termed "mentally disturbed." While world attention was devoted that same week to developments in Austria—where Jörg Haider's far-right Freedom Party joined a coalition government—anti-immigrant passion in southern Spain went virtually unnoticed.

The El Ejido riots are the most noteworthy example of anti-Moroccan sentiment in Spain, but they are by no means unprecedented. Anti-immigrant sentiment has flared up frequently in recent years. Observers remain very anxious about future trends and the potential for greater conflict. The Spanish agricultural economy relies on inexpensive Moroccan labor, a need that is likely to increase, not diminish, in the years to come.¹ Equally important is the pressure for Moroccans to emigrate. While a day's wage for a Moroccan in Spain is dreadful by European standards, it is as much as four times what a Moroccan can make at home. Moreover, as Morocco begins to implement an Association Accord signed with the 15-member European Union (EU) in February 1996, its economy will undergo sharp economic dislocations that will likely increase migration pressures to Spain.²

Moroccans in Spain

An old adage about the Mediterranean is that "Europe lacks a southern border." Perhaps the inverse could be said about North Africa: it does not have a northern border. In the post-colonial era, North African countries have deepened their reliance on Europe for trade, aid and investment.³ Europe—especially the former colonial power France—continues to influence profoundly North African culture, language and society. In short, North Africa has become integrated, albeit unevenly, into an economic and political space dominated by Europe.

This dynamic is also evident with respect to trans-Mediterranean migration. Of course, migration in the Mediterranean basin is an age-old phenomenon, but in recent years, North African migration to Europe has been gradually more visible, raising new challenges for both sending and receiving governments. The deepening integration of the EU, coupled with close ties with North Africa, has increased migration pressures toward Europe. Nevertheless, while European integration has enhanced flows of trade, finance and communication between member countries of the EU, migration has not become "globalized." Although individual European governments and EU institutions support efforts to liberalize trade and finance, the regulation of immigration still rests on the concept that the sovereignty of a state depends on the control of a country's borders. Migrants are subject to sharp controls and frequently live clandestinely. Despite the controls and the illegal nature of much immigration, a strong labor demand exists in advanced industrial economies for menial work in agricultural and textile sectors.

The number of Moroccans living and working in Spain is difficult to estimate. Across the EU, census and data collection methods differ by country, complicating efforts to determine legal immigration, not to mention the scope of illegal migration. Perhaps the most reliable source of information remains the Migration Observation System (SOPEMI) of the Organization of Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). According to SOPEMI, the

most recent estimate of legal foreign residents in Spain is 609,000, of which nearly 20 percent (111,000) are Moroccan; Moroccans represent by far the largest percentage of foreign-born residents.⁴ The percentage of Moroccans in Spain's total labor force is even higher; nearly 40 percent (67,000) of Spain's total foreign labor force (176,000) is Moroccan.

In southern Andalusian regions such as Almería, where El Ejido is located, the percentage of Moroccans is still higher. According to the Almería Acoge, a NGO that assists immigrants, of the 14,800 immigrants in Almería that originate from countries outside the EU, nearly two-thirds (9,600) are Moroccan.⁵ Most of the residents are legal, having obtained residency permits under new laws that grant asylum to illegals. Many, of course, work clandestinely.

When Spain (and Portugal) joined the European Community (EC) in 1986, the 12-member EC became fully self-sufficient in the Mediterranean agricultural products (citrus, tomatoes, olives, olive oil and wine) that North Africa had long exported to Europe. In many ways, Morocco competes with Spain for access to Europe's agricultural export markets, yet Spain has one enormous advantage: membership. Almería is Spain's agricultural engine room, the heart of the country's "plastic revolution," a term referring to the intensive hothouse agriculture devoted to the growth of citrus and tomatoes for export. Rapid economic growth since the late 1980s has transformed the province into a center of banking and new wealth. Despite this wealth—or perhaps because of it—most immigrants live in wretched conditions, an "apartheid" at the core of the economic success. Dwellings are often no more than sheds or old motor vehicles, lacking running water, electricity and privacy.

Pushed and Pulled

Why do Moroccans migrate to Spain, risking their lives in rickety boats (*pateras*) crossing the Strait of Gibraltar? The answer defies easy explanation. Many dynamics intertwine to "push" and "pull" international migration. On the "push" side of the equation—the forces that impel a migrant to leave his or her country—one must first consider Morocco's widespread unemployment and underemployment. Although it appears that Morocco's population growth has begun to slow, the country's demographic profile remains skewed toward a youthful cohort in need of employment.⁶ One estimate is that unemployment among urban youth was 30 percent in 1989. It is likely higher today.⁷ The US State Department estimates that urban unemployment was 21.5 percent in 1999.⁸ Furthermore, according to the United Nations Development Program, in 1997 Morocco's adult literacy rate was 46 percent (33 percent for women), over a third of the population lacked access to safe water, and real GDP per capita stood at \$1250.⁹ With the country perennially stricken by drought, Morocco's crucial agricultural sector is in dire straits.

A related push factor is the importance of remittances to the Moroccan economy. Remittances are earnings sent home to families and, according to one estimate, are second to oil

revenues in world trade.¹⁰ The amount repatriated by Moroccans working in Spain is not available, but according to World Bank data, Moroccans working outside of Morocco have sent home roughly \$2 billion a year throughout the 1990s.¹¹ In 1998, the figure was \$2.1 billion, representing 5 percent of Morocco's GDP, or 16 percent of Morocco's exported goods and services. In comparison, direct foreign investment in the late 1990s was only \$300-\$400 million per year. The flow of remittances works on at least two levels. At the micro-level, individuals migrate as part of a strategy designed to gain employment and secure income for a family. At the macro-level, governments benefit from remittances as they provide a source of hard currency and release of employment pressures for a struggling economy.

On the "pull" side of the equation, there is rapidly increasing demand in the Spanish economy for foreign workers. For decades, even centuries, Spain was a net exporter of labor, sending its people around the world, especially to the Americas. Although the official rate of unemployment was 18.8 percent in 1998,¹² "New Spain" has become a net importer of labor, especially for low-wage jobs in the economy. In part, this is because of the rapid economic growth experienced in the

1980s and 1990s. Spain also has among the lowest birthrates in Europe. According to the UNDP, the population is expected to contract significantly by 2015. Spain's population is getting older, too, and the state pension funds risk bankruptcy unless economic growth is sustained by foreign labor.

Spain's demand for labor may be the main reason that Moroccan immigrants meet with ambiguity in terms of official Spanish policy. On the one hand, the government periodically passes asylum laws granting residency permits to illegals. In fact, the events in El Ejido came shortly after a new law had taken effect in January allowing some 70,000 illegal immigrants to become residents; in 1999, some 30,000 were given legal status. On the other hand, the center-right government tightened immigration laws in September 2000, restricting the number of residency permits and enhancing interdiction efforts. But how far will the tightening go? Spanish growers and exporters have an interest in keeping a surplus of migrant labor, as competition in the labor market helps maintain low, low wages.

Finally, European television, print media, and arts offer powerful images of an affluent European economy to Morocco. The Moroccan cityscape and countryside is dotted with satellite dishes pointed to Europe. While it would be a mistake to argue that Moroccan culture passively receives a dominant European culture, Europe's ideological hegemony does exert a powerful effect on Moroccans' perceptions of a good life abroad.

More Moroccans seem to be risking the eight-mile strait. As of August 2000, Spanish police caught 7,000 illegal migrants, twice as many as during the same period in 1999.¹³ Whether the increase results from a larger flow or enhanced Spanish efforts to interdict immigrants is unclear. Nonetheless, it seems that the allure of Europe, and the push from North Africa, combine to prompt the heavy migration. In July 2000, according to the BBC, Moroccan film director Mohammed Ismail lost 70 extras working on a film about migration. The actors had been

hired to depict the lives of Moroccan migrants, yet disappeared one night in boats to Europe. Ismail "feared that his cast had taken their roles too seriously."

EU-Spanish-Moroccan Relations

Not surprisingly, the official Moroccan reaction to the events of El Ejido was swift and vociferous. Moroccan officials denounced the violence, with Abderrahmane Youssoufi's government expressing concern for its citizens living in Spain. The pro-palace newspaper, *Le Matin*, criticized the passivity of the Spanish police forces in quelling the riots. The Moroccan

Human Rights Organization (OMDH) also denounced the riots in a communiqué, noting the irony that the Moroccan-European partnership was threatened in the same country that launched the initiative at the celebrated Barcelona Conference of 1995.¹⁴

Routine meetings between Spanish and Moroccan officials—which would otherwise go virtually unnoticed in the press—received central treatment in the aftermath of the riots. Coincidentally, for example, Secretary of State and Cooperation Aïcha Belarbi traveled to Madrid the week of the riots for a long-planned colloquium on Spanish-Moroccan cooperation. There she met with Spanish Minister of Foreign Affairs, Abel Matutes, issuing a joint declaration denouncing the riots. Matutes sought to reassure Rabat that bilateral relations would not be affected by the events. For years, Morocco has sought to encourage Spanish direct foreign investment in its economy, joint ventures, cooperation on Spanish-Moroccan electric utilities and construction of the gas pipeline between Algeria and Spain that traverses Morocco.

Images of "El Ejido" may be increasingly invoked during ongoing, thorny negotiations between Morocco, Spain and the EU over access to Morocco's fisheries and quotas for Moroccan tomato exports to Europe. EU-Moroccan negotiations over such matters are extremely intricate, as the European Commission must negotiate on behalf of a demanding, cantankerous member state—namely Spain. With respect to fisheries, Spanish boats account for 700 of the

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EU's 800-boat fishing fleet that seeks access to the abundant deep-sea waters off Morocco's Atlantic seaboard. Presently, negotiations are underway to renew a four-year fishing accord that ran from 1996-2000, and they will probably be as contentious as the previous talks in 1995.¹⁵

Officials from the Moroccan Ministry of Interior have met with their Spanish counterparts for years to cooperate on immigration and drugs. In meetings held in 1995 and 1996, Spanish officials agreed to ease procedures on the renewal of legal residence permits, although no agreements on illegal immigration were announced. In such negotiations, Morocco has held out for development aid from the EU, as well as bilateral aid from Spain, in exchange for agreements on assistance in stopping illegal immigration. European authorities have been forthcoming in providing Morocco with boats and radar, but Rabat wants broader development aid. Rabat also argues that preset migration quotas would go much farther to regulate traffic across the Mediterranean than interdiction efforts.

Yet, as with enduring controversy over drug interdiction, it appears that immigration may remain a source of friction. In addition to European qualms over Morocco's control of its own immigration, the Spanish government contends that Morocco has been slow to thwart the use of the Spanish enclaves of Melilla and Ceuta as a transit point for non-Moroccans traveling to Spain. Spain has controlled the former penal colonies on Morocco's Mediterranean coast for centuries, and they are the only remaining colonial outposts on the African continent. Today, migrants from sub-Saharan Africa use Ceuta and Melilla as staging points for their own efforts to get into Spain. Morocco's lack of effort may be somewhat "passive-aggressive," as Rabat refuses to recognize Melilla and Ceuta as legitimate Spanish territory.

Future Prospects

In the aftermath of the riots in El Ejido, tensions re-

mained high. In another scene out of Steinbeck's *Grapes of Wrath*, owners began to replace North African laborers with workers from Romania, setting immigrants in further wage competition with each other and aggravating tensions between immigrant communities. One contractor was quoted in *Le Monde Diplomatique* as saying: "I'm finished with Moroccans. They're too much trouble."


But in the long term, the Spanish demand for Moroccan labor will increase, and Morocco is likely to supply it. Although Morocco appears to be enjoying a certain degree of optimism and openness in the aftermath of Mohammed VI's July 1999 accession to the throne, the vast bulk of the population remains well outside the benefits of the economic and political system. Morocco's economic problems are deep-rooted. Given the fact that most

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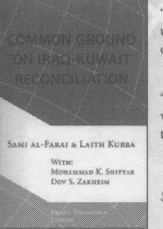


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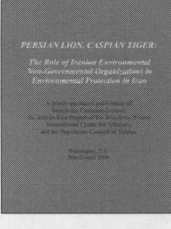


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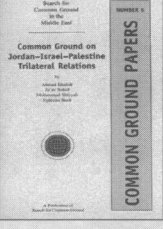
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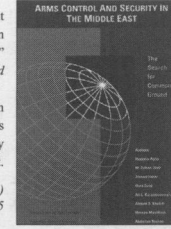
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people in rural areas and urban quarters are effectively shut out of the networks and interconnected families of the affluent elite, emigration should remain quite high.

A central issue to watch carefully is the impact of the Association Agreements with Europe on the Moroccan economy. Although the Association Accord was signed with the European Commission in 1996, it took four years for the fifteen member states of the EU to ratify it. It entered into force on March 1, 2000. As Morocco begins to dismantle trade restrictions—in compliance with the free trade nostrums of the EU, the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund—it will lose import duties as a source of revenue for the national budget. Such duties represent 26 percent of state revenues.¹⁶ In addition, Moroccan firms will be placed into competition with European firms, who will gain greater access to the previously protected Moroccan market. How, and in what ways, this will affect the economy remains to be seen, but it seems likely to exacerbate migration pressures.

On top of all of this is the aforementioned lack of access for Moroccan agricultural products to the

European market. At the heart of the events of El Ejido is a remarkable irony about EU-Moroccan relations: Moroccan immigrants have been and will increasingly be used in Spain to cultivate the very agricultural products that Morocco cannot export to Europe.

Given the state of Morocco's political economy—as well as the country's subordinate location within an economic sphere dominated by Europe—migration is unlikely to disappear as a source of conflict. Redoubled cooperation between officials is essential, as are innovative policy solutions. Spanish officials will have to intensify their efforts to transcend xenophobia and anti-immigrant sentiment among segments of the Spanish population, as well as to legislate labor laws that protect immigrant communities. Spain should also increase its quota of legal migration. For its part, the Youssoufi government in Rabat will have to translate the positive energy generated by the new king into genuine reform of the country's political economy. These are all rather tall orders. ■

Author's Note: *The author thanks Martha Johnson for her research assistance.*

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